Exhibit designer and artist Emma Thorne-Christy plastered Los Angeles telephone poles with tear-off paper flyers inviting callers to leave her a voicemail sharing what the pandemic had given or taken from them in her *Pandemic Lost and Found Hotline* archive.

# Going Rogue for Good

## Free the Museum

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In May 2020, museums around the world sat shuttered under public-health mandates in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the Omnimuseum Project, a nonprofit think tank whose work centers around exploring ways of activating the museum experience in the everyday world, gathered a small group of museum specialists (the authors of this article) to build an initiative aimed at helping museums escape the physical, operational, and social constraints of their buildings.[1]

While many museums were developing an array of virtual offerings to reach their audiences, we focused on creative solutions rooted in the physical world. Building on the concept of *ubiquitous* museology, a theoretical and practical framework that looks at the world through a "museum lens" and recalibrates museum practices to the opportunities and complexities of public space, we launched Free the Museum as an Omnimuseum Project initiative in September 2020.

## What is Free the Museum?

Free the Museum grew from a series of brainstorming sessions designed to build on the tools and tactics the Omnimuseum Project uses in ubiquitous museology workshops and charrettes. Also drawing inspiration from street art, placemaking, and other practices used in public environments, the initiative took form as both a "call to action" and a support system for museum practitioners. The initiative is still evolving, but the core purpose of Free the Museum is to equip people to "activate the 'museum experience' in the world around them, transforming everyday places into sites of engagement, reflection, healing, activism, and informal learning."[2] We refer to these place-based experiences as "activations" because they bring to life often overlooked or forgotten aspects of an existing

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environment. Activations run the gamut from sidewalk chalk messaging to powder-coated steel pop-ups and often reflect a spirit of street-ready forms of expression like activist art and guerrilla installations.

To scaffold the creative process outside museum walls, Free the Museum offers a no-cost Activation Planning Guide and Tactic Cards (fig. 1) full of brainstorming prompts to help practitioners find an approach to working in public environments.[3] The website (www.freethemuseum.org) also features an ever-evolving catalogue of projects that demonstrate ways of activating a site without

undermining its original functions and features, and are also affordable, DIY-friendly, scalable, and participatory. Anyone inspired by Free the Museum, or already working beyond their institutional walls, can submit their projects to the archive to motivate others, share lessons learned, and join a community of practice.

Free the Museum challenges museums and practitioners to adopt the physical world as the subject itself, and to adapt their modes of engagement to activate the Extraordinary hidden among the Everyday. This begins with a belief that *the world is already a museum*, a dynamic venue and a "collection" in-situ, teeming with natural and built objects, contextualized phenomena, human history, culture, and social interactions. Because it supports engaging audiences in the real world, the Free the Museum approach offers the opportunity to address issues of equity and inclusion, accessibility, and community collaboration.

**Fig. 1.** Free the Museum's Tactic Cards were originally developed by the Omnimuseum Project as a charrette tool to instigate a higher yield of ideas. Their non-specificity allows them to be mixed and matched to create unique combinations for engaging people in public settings.

One year in, we reflect on the question: How does Free the Museum usher in new ways for cultural institutions to move into a post-pandemic world? Based on our work and examples of activations from our growing community, this article demonstrates how our principles and mindset rise to meet the challenges of a new era.

## The Rogue Mindset

The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines going rogue as "to begin to behave in an independent or uncontrolled way that is not authorized, normal, or expected."[4] The materials and approaches we share, and many of the projects submitted to Free the Museum, illustrate this attitude. On one hand, it is the mindset of ingenuity unleashed from traditional solutions

in the struggle to survive (in this case, the pressures and uncertainties of the pandemic). On the other hand, it escapes traditional processes and modes of implementation, giving permission to act more freely and nimbly, and to respond rapidly to evolving conditions and current events.

The exhibition *Between Us and Catastrophe* (fig. 2), mounted in the street-side windows of Philadelphia's Science History Institute, exemplifies the ways individual practitioners are taking their work into their own hands through a variety of approaches. It began as a personal project by photographer Kyle Cassidy to document the individuals who were keeping society going during the pandemic. In a similar spirit, exhibit designer and artist Emma Thorne-Christy responded to this historical moment by plastering Los Angeles telephone poles with tear-off paper flyers inviting callers to leave her a voicemail sharing what the pandemic had given or taken from them in her *Pandemic Lost and Found Hotline* (intro image).[5] Former children's museum staffer and artist Amy Brown demonstrates that activations do not have to be outdoors, nor grand in scale, to benefit from bringing content into shared, public spaces. Brown organized children living in her apartment complex to create the pop-up "Ryland Museum" in a hallway of the complex. She created science and art activities that

generated the content for the exhibition to help distract the children – and herself – from their anxieties caused by the lockdown.[6]

Museum teams that went rogue, in the *Merriam-Webster* definition of the word, discovered new benefits to both the museums and their communities. The Baltimore Museum of Industry (BMI) tells the story of the industries and workers who built the steel town of Baltimore, Maryland. In October 2020, BMI mounted the exhibition *Women of Steel* (fig. 3), originally slated for an indoor gallery, on the museum's fence in South Baltimore, providing a museum experience to passersby. The exhibition focuses on the stories of women who worked at Bethlehem Steel's Sparrows Point mill in Baltimore from the 1930s until 2012, when the mill closed. Developed in collaboration with the leadership of "Women of Steel," a subcommittee of the mill's steelworkers' union, the eponymous exhibition features photographs and first-person stories from local female steelworkers. The exhibition's themes of discrimination, sexual harassment, and childcare challenges speak directly to the underlying causes of the painfully inequitable impact of COVID-19.

Beth Maloney, BMI's Director of Interpretation, says "we've seen an uptick in interest to donate artifacts, contribute to fundraising efforts…and

Fig. 2. *Between Us and Catastrophe*, installed by the Science History Institute in its street-facing windows, celebrates the pandemic's frontline workers with portraits by local Philadelphia documentary photographer Kyle Cassidy.

share stories on our blog," demonstrating to museum staff "the kind of energy we have been able to generate when we position resources (i.e., this exhibition) in a way that means something to the communities we serve."[7] (See also "Connection Through a Chain-Link Fence" on page 54 in this issue for insights from one of the first projects submitted to Free the Museum's archive.)

While installing an exhibition in a community space can be a logistical challenge, the novel context can greatly deepen a show's meaning. When the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum (ACM) learned that the museum would not reopen in time to host the traveling exhibition *Men of Change*,[8] Free the Museum's approach offered an alternative – to reimagine what was originally planned as a 3,500-square-foot indoor exhibition by installing it outdoors

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in a neighborhood reflective of the exhibit content. As result, the exhibition, which celebrates often unsung African American "men of change," presented the museum with an opportunity to forge new partnerships with civic leaders in Deanwood, an African



BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF INDUSTRY

Fig. 3. When the Baltimore Museum of Industry installed its *Women of Steel* exhibition outdoors, women featured in the displays could visit safely during the pandemic – including Addie "Loretta" Houston Smith (left), former chair of the union committee for which the exhibition was named.

**Fig. 4.** The Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum installed the "Storytellers" section of the *Men of Change* exhibition in front of the public library in the Deanwood neighborhood of Washington, DC – a real-life source of present-day stories of bold African American leaders.

American neighborhood of Washington, DC. With those partners, ACM was able to install the "Myth-breakers" section of the exhibition on the grounds of a Deanwood charter high school for boys of color with a restorative justice program. It mounted the "Community" section at the entrance to the Deanwood Recreation Center, a neighborhood meeting hub, and "Storytellers" in front of the public library (fig. 4). As ACM Director of Education Andrea Jones explained, "This exhibition amplifies the stories in the neighborhood, and the neighborhood amplifies the stories in the exhibition. Together they make such a powerful statement."[9]

Seeking to speak to social justice issues, notably Black Lives Matter, Ralph Appelbaum Associates invited students from Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, to partner with an affiliate of theirs, the Black Box Disrupt Space Gallery. This new gallery is located in Brixton, a district in south London famous for the vibrant Afro-Caribbean culture that has thrived there since the 1960s. The gallery aims to promote the work of under-represented Black artists to all parts of the local community and the art world at large; its founder, Paul Reid, chose "Black Box" as the antithesis of the elitism associated with the "White Cube." Because the gallery's premises are small, Reid wanted to find ways to physically expand it beyond its walls into the neighborhood and around the globe.

In working with Tricia Austin, who is Course Leader of MA Narrative Environments at Central Saint Martins and one of the authors of this article, the students embraced the principles of Free the Museum by developing a four-part design proposition. The first element was an interactive, pop-up grid structure for Brixton's Windrush Square showing images of black artists' work, designed to engage local people in the heart of their community. The second was a location-based audio trail featuring the artists' voices telling the stories of the places in Brixton to which they were particularly attached. By following the audio trail on their mobile phones, users could learn more about Brixton as they were led to the famous Brixton Market – where they find the Black Box Disrupt Space Gallery. Once there, they would find the third element: projections of the art that spill out through the gallery windows into the surrounding space (fig. 5), expanding the internal space by incorporating the immediate surroundings. The fourth element was a series of posters by Brixton artists. The posters featured a QR code offering people the chance to connect to a digital platform that would showcase an extended collection of art and opened the project to the world.



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Fig. 5. Central Saint Martins students' design for the Black Box Gallery includes an audio trail and sidewalk projections to integrate the work of Black artists into London's Brixton neighborhood.

## Challenges and Opportunities

While the complexities of working in public space present many challenges, there are many opportunities to be found within those challenges. A critical asset of a site is its people: those who live, work, or use the space. Free the Museum advocates respecting the community by seeking local perspectives on how the area should be used and what the community finds socially and culturally valuable or historically significant. Tap the talents of local artists, writers, musicians, performers, and makers, as well as the knowledge of local educators and historians. We believe situating stories in people's familiar surroundings where their knowledge is well-rooted increases direct personal connections to the project.

What's more, once a museum has made a successful foray into a community ecosystem, community members may expect a continued relationship; commit to finding ways of doing so. When steelworkers who did not have a previous relationship with the Baltimore Museum of Industry saw the *Women of Steel* exhibition, they approached the museum asking to be included. Although the physical exhibition was completed, the staff was ready to interview these women and feature their oral histories in blog posts and a *Women of Steel* podcast episode, which was downloaded 2,000 times within a month.[10] With the installation of *Men of Change*, the Deanwood community leaders understood that the exhibition could mean more to their struggling neighborhood than merely an opportunity for education. They recognized that the increased visibility of their community could be leveraged for needed city services, business development, recruitment and funding for the high school, and support for other cultural projects. With

this installation, ACM initiated a long-term relationship with the neighborhood to address pressing social and economic inequalities.

Other challenges and opportunities that arise in activating the museum experience in everyday places involve revenue, contextual adaptation, and conducting evaluations.

**Evaluating a project outside the museum is tricky.** Free metrics like ticket sales or head counts are not always possible, but these are not necessarily effective measures of learning or engagement to begin with. Getting actionable data requires an investment, regardless of location. We advocate inviting contributed content, embedding a survey or a call to action that can be tracked, and spending time observing and interviewing users.

**Rather than thinking in terms of "design-build," we suggest a "design-adapt" approach** that considers what components and transactions already exist in the environment that may lend themselves to being co-opted as devices for delivering content. Is there an existing context, a street, a restaurant, a grocery store the experience can be assimilated into?

**Some museums are concerned that moving "the experience" outside undermines collecting revenue at the gate.** This is missing the point. First, there is a wide selection of monetization models to consider, including online purchases, micro-transactions, and on-site purchases (such as street vending and machine vending). But, monetizing the experience is not the only way to support the museum. Instead, consider if the project is fundable: Does it attract donors looking to break new ground, or fulfill grant requirements for community engagement? Externalizing the museum experience can capture new and more

diverse audiences as well as create opportunities for partnerships with other organizations who may be willing to offset production costs or collaborate on project fundraising.

## Implications for the Future of the Museum Industry

Free the Museum is not advocating that we abandon museum buildings and the exhibitions they house, but that we recognize their benefits and constraints – where they support museums' goals and where they constrict museums' abilities to advance their missions. In their most traditional sense, museums were built for containing, conserving, and displaying precious objects. We recognize that Dorothy's ruby slippers or the Dead Sea Scrolls would not last long outside the protective environment of the museum building, but the goals and functions of museums have grown well beyond the care and display of collections.[11]

With the definition of "museum" in flux,[12] and so much work to be done, the museum world is changing. This initiative is designed to meet the moment, looking to create a community of mutual support, idea sharing, and practical problem solving. Free the Museum's ultimate goal is not to provide answers about "how" the museum experience happens, but challenge the assumptions of "where" it happens, offering a conceptual and practical framework for adapting our practice to the world at large.

Our industry has entered a liminal space of experimentation and creativity. Through experiences that are firmly planted in the real world, Free the Museum aims to inspire and equip museum practitioners, and in particular those who create exhibitions, with ways of creating more open, inclusive, equitable, and relevant museums that are more elastic and responsive to change. ∎

1    The Omnimuseum Project is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) founded in 2012 by Michael Burns as a catalyst for planning and designing museum experiences in the public sphere. See the Omnimuseum Project at www.omnimuseum.org.

2    For more information, visit the "About" section of the Omnimuseum Project website at https://omnimuseum.org/about.html.

3    "Tools," Free the Museum, accessed March 23, 2021, www.freethemuseum.org/tools.html.

4    "*Merriam-Webster* Online Dictionary," Merriam-Webster, accessed March 12, 2021, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rogue?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld.

5    "Pandemic Lost and Found," Exhibits of Humanity, accessed March 20, 2021, www.communitylostandfound.org.

6    "Ryland Museum," Amy Artworms Brown, accessed March 30, 2021, www.artwormsbrown.com/about-museum.

7    Beth Maloney, email to Betsy Loring, March 18, 2021.

8    The original *Men of Change* exhibition was created by Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES). The Anacostia Community Museum worked with SITES to create the outdoor version, dubbed *Men of Change: Taking it to the Streets*.

9    Andrea Jones, conversation with coauthors, March 26, 2021.

10    Auni Gelles, email to Betsy Loring, March 15, 2021.

11    "Dorothy's Slippers," from the renowned 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, are on exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC; the Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient Jewish and Hebrew religious manuscripts, are in the collections of The Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem.

12    Fion Tse, "International Museum Group Cannot Agree on Definition of 'Museum,'" *ArtAsiaPacific News*, August 14, 2020, http://artasiapacific.com/News/InternationalMuseumGroupCannotAgreeOnDefinitionOfMuseum, accessed March 20, 2021.